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‘This is my cheating ex’: Gender and sexuality in revenge porn

Sexualities

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Abstract

Revenge pornography is the online, and at times offline, non-consensual distribution, or sharing, of explicit images by ex-partners, partners, others, or hackers seeking revenge or entertainment. In this article, we discursively analyse a selected range of electronic written texts accompanying explicit images posted by self-identified straight/gay/lesbian (male-to-female, female-to-male, male-to-male, female-to-female postings) on a popular revenge pornography website ‘MyEx.com’. Situating our analysis in debates on gender and sexuality, we examine commonalities and differences in the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which gender and sexuality are invoked in posters’ accounts of their motivations for revenge pornography.

Keywords

Discourse analysis, gender violence, ICTs, revenge pornography, sexuality, social media

Introduction

Revenge pornography (hereafter, revenge porn) is the online, sometimes offline, non-consensual distribution, or sharing, of explicit images by ex-partners, partners, others, or hackers seeking revenge or entertainment – also referred to as non-consensual pornography (NCP) or violation by way of the distribution of sexual images or image-based sexual abuse.¹ However, there is immediately a major

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caveat to be added, namely, that the terms ‘revenge porn’ and ‘revenge pornography’ are themselves open to severe critique:

The term ‘revenge porn’ is misleading ... First, perpetrators are not always being motivated by vengeance. Many act out of a desire for profit, notoriety, or entertainment, including hackers, purveyors of hidden or ‘upskirt’ camera recordings, and people who distribute stolen cellphone photos. The term ‘revenge porn’ is also misleading in that it implies that taking a picture of oneself naked or engaged in a sexual act (or allowing someone else to take such a picture) is pornographic. But creating explicit images in the expectation within the context of a private, intimate relationship – an increasingly common practice – is not equivalent to creating pornography. The act of disclosing a private, sexually explicit image to someone other than the intended audience, however, can accurately be described as pornographic, as it transforms a private image into public sexual entertainment. (Franks, 2016: 2)

In this article, we use the term ‘revenge porn’, as this is the most well-used term to describe the phenomenon and actions examined.

Whilst revenge porn can be located within several broad frameworks, we focus here on what this relatively recent phenomenon tells about the dynamics of gender and sexuality, through detailed analysis of posters’ texts on the largest revenge porn site, ‘MyEx.com’. We address how tropes around gender and sexuality are drawn upon in online spaces in accounting for actions across what are presented in the posts as different gender-sexual permutations of poster–postee, for example, male–female, male–male. In particular, we examine commonalities and differences in the complex, and sometimes contradictory, ways in which gender and sexuality are invoked in posters’ accounts of their motivations for revenge pornography.

While there is a vast literature on the uses and abuses of pornography, and how different forms of pornography can be understood in relation to gender and sexuality, the great majority of studies focus on the production and consumption of commercial pornography (Boyle, 2010; Elund, 2015; Itzin, 1993; Paasonen, 2011). Less examined is non-commercial pornography, such as various forms of ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) or ‘home-made’ pornography, which might or might not be consensual. Less examined still is the online non-consensual revenge porn.

Pornography, from its very naming, is fundamentally gendered, sexual and sexualized, for example, in the assumed gender and sexuality of those depicted, and those viewing and/or reading. With its recent technological intensification, through websites, iPhones and similar devices, revenge porn resurfaces various established debates, such as those on: distinctions between pornography and erotica, the ethics of pornography, the effects of pornography on behaviour (cf. Itzin, 1993; Segal and McIntosh, 1993), its relation to the sex trade, and the gendered-sexual semiotic, textual and discursive conventions of pornography (Boyle, 2010; Paasanen, 2011). Even with such differences in analysis, pornography is, typically, seen as heavily embedded in gender and sexual power relations, often, though not always, with connections, implicit or explicit, to gender-sexual domination. More broadly, the

structure of much of the sex industry is highly and hierarchically gendered, sexual(iz)ed, and heteronormative (Dines, 2010; Hughes, 2002; Jeffreys, 2009). Much heterosexual pornography instances patriarchal, sexist, and complicit masculine practices that maintain patriarchal and sexist relations. Within these structures and contexts, the pornographic practices of various men and of various masculinities persist, as producers, practitioners, and consumers. Having said that, there is increasing diversification of porn (Attwood, 2009), and many genres, and indeed sub-genres, of porn, including those within DIY porn, gay porn, lesbian porn, queer porn and trans porn, that may or may not reproduce gender hegemony (Wilkinson, 2017).

While these debates necessarily frame our own study to a large extent, we are also interested in the specificities of revenge porn, as against pornography more generally. This means contextualizing the recent major growth of online revenge porn as part of the wider explosion of (online) sexualization and (online, often non-commercial) pornography (Dines, 2010; Hughes, 2002; Jeffreys, 2009), pornographicization (Attwood, 2009) and ‘mainstreamification’ of pornography (Empel, 2011). Revenge porn can, thus, be understood within a long historical development of pornography, in part through different technological affordances, with moves from pictorial and written to photographic to video, and now to online pornography. Specifically, online revenge porn has been facilitated by characteristic features of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as: reproducibility of images, personalization (Wellman, 2001), and intertwinings of ‘real’ and ‘representational’, online and offline (Hearn and Parkin, 2001), codex and net (Gilbert, 2013). Revenge porn is yet another example of the multiple possibilities for online socio-sexual violences, violations and abuses, such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking, trolling, and online aggression, misogyny and homophobia, with their dire negative effects.

The 2013 online survey ‘Effects of Revenge Porn’ (Cyber Civil Rights Initiative, 2014) found that 90% of victims of revenge porn are women ranging from teens to early 30s. However, there are reports of victims as young as 11 (Ridely, 2015), and a review of the 30 or so platforms either specifically for or used for revenge porn (BBC, 2014) shows people who appear to be, or are reported to be, much older. The growth and popularity of revenge porn is illustrated by the infamous Hunter Moore’s website ‘IsAnybodyUp’, providing online user-generated pornographic content. Before it was closed in April 2012, it averaged 150,000–240,000 unique page views per day (Dodero, 2012). Indeed, the site received approximately 35,000 submissions of photographic content each week, although half were claimed to be consensual (Hill, 2012). In a 2014 survey of 1100 New Yorkers, nearly half (45%) reported that they had recorded themselves having sex (*New York Post*, 2014). An online survey by the internet security company McAfee (2013) found more than 50% of adults shared sexually explicit material through their mobile devices, whilst 50% said they stored such images online, and 16% they had shared sexually explicit images and videos with complete strangers. Such surveys suggest that while many people have access to visual material that could be used for revenge, the

majority do not so use it. Some studies have found that while many young people may have viewed pornography, relatively few have taken naked pictures of themselves or others, and even fewer had sent them to other people (Ringrose et al., 2012; also see Puccio and Havey, 2016). Growth in revenge porn has been attributed, by some, to sexting (DoSomething.org, 2015; GuardChild.com, 2015; Hasinoff, 2015). While this increases image circulation, it does not explain abuse of those images in subsequent revenges.

Methods

Data

MyEx.com is reported to be the largest revenge porn dedicated website containing more than 12,000 images (April 2017). Hosted by Web Solutions, B.V. Netherlands, MyEx.com is reported as being operated by anonymous US Americans, in coordination with colleagues in the Philippines (Steinbaugh, 2014). Founded in 2013, it provides an internationally accessible platform for people to upload and share images and videos of other people anonymously. Posters are invited to provide the following details of the person to be posted: their name, nickname if they have one, age, country of origin, region, and to entitle the post and write some text about the person. Unlike other online revenge porn sites, MyEx.com facilitates both posters' and viewers' engagement with the material they encounter through the computer-mediated communication channel, namely, comments and specific search facilities.²

Our analysis focuses on the accompanying comments by poster of the images. In particular we were interested in the gender-sexual positionings and sexually orientated dynamics of revenge porn since arguably it both speaks explicitly in words and shows without explicitly saying.³ Thus, we examine how posters of revenge porn online invoke gender and sexuality to account for posting explicit images of an ex-partner, and the similarities and differences between different sexual framings of revenge porn: male-to-female, female-to-male, male-to-male, female-to-female.

Ethics

University ethical approval was granted before working with the MyEx.com data. The internet presents ethical challenges around what is deemed 'public' or 'private' (Hookway, 2008; Rodham and Gavin, 2006; Walther and Boyd, 2002). Whilst every effort should be made to seek consent to use online data, gaining consent from each poster or posted victim would be almost impossible without substantial detective work; yet privacy issues are still applicable for those whose images are posted on MyEx.com, especially since most posts appear to be non-consensual and explicit (Whisnant, 2010). In line with British Psychological Society guidelines on use of online data (BPS, 2013), we anonymized the dataset (e.g. by omitting

biographical data, replacing names with A1 (Anonymous 1), A2), and removing in-text personal details, vernaculars or references. We did not draw upon the visual material since we did not want to compromise the dignity of those pictured further, even though that restricts some kinds of analysis and interpretation.⁴

Analysis

We employed a discourse analysis as set out by Potter (1996) because it aims to explore how people work up ‘versions of world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds’ in the process of discursive interactions including online electronic talk (Potter, 1996: 146). Relevant version(s) of the world depend on the topic of conversation (e.g. seeking revenge), who the anticipated audiences is (e.g. the posted victim, associates, other wo/men), the context (e.g. infidelity), location (e.g. online revenge porn platform), and time (e.g. trends). Our analysis includes texts from MyEx.com’s inception in 2013 to 28 March 2016. Although images are posted anonymously the gender of the poster can be seen through gender orientation and indexing (see Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998). For example, male indexing occurred through male references (e.g. ‘blokes’, ‘dude’, ‘guys’, ‘girls’, ‘bitches’), gender and sexuality positioning (e.g. ‘wife’, ‘my ex-husband’, ‘girlfriend’, ‘my ex-boyfriend’),⁵ and by invoking sexuality markers (e.g. ‘fucks other girls’, ‘got me pregnant’, ‘your wife dude’, ‘we met on a gay site’, ‘she ended up hooking up with a few other women’). These make reference to gender and (hetero or homo)sexuality, even without these identities being ‘named out aloud’ (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998: 4). Given that 90% of posts are by men, it is not surprising that around 80% of the posts were of (i.e. about or directed towards) women constructed as heterosexual or having participated in a heterosexual relationship; roughly 18% of men constructed as heterosexual or having participated in a heterosexual relationship; 1.5% of men constructed as gay or having participated in a male same-sex relationship; and less than 1% of women constructed as lesbian or having participated in a female same-sex relationship.

We analysed our data according to Baker’s (1997) three-step process: locate the central themes that are named and/or implied in the talk-in-interaction; focus on the discursive activities within each section; and examine how the respondents construct and design their accounts and for what purpose e.g. to produce descriptions, command, instruct, and so forth. The text is analysed for its individual parts as well as a sequential whole. Elements of talk are discussed individually where participants have made them relevant. These include listing and, in particular, three-part lists to help bolster claims (Jefferson, 2004), the use of extreme-case formulations to legitimize and support allegations (Pomerantz, 1986), and the construction of identities and bounded activities and predicates (Sacks, 1992).

The following themes and posts are exemplars that address our research questions on how gender and sexuality is invoked by posters in the data: (1) *Sexually discarded* ($n = 43$): sexually used the posted, and now finished with them; (2) *Sexual trophyism* ($n = 72$): claimed the posted as a sexual trophy; (3) *Sexual humiliation*

($n = 354$): sexually degraded the posted; (4) *Risky sex* ($n = 53$): warned viewers of postee's interest in risky or unclean sex; (5) *Sexual dissatisfaction* ($n = 1,041$): accused postee of poor or unwilling sexual performance; (6) *Kinky sex* ($n = 89$): accused postee of wanting non-normative sex; (7) *Sexual promiscuity* ($n = 2,323$): accused the posted of promiscuity; and (8) *Phony sexuality* ($n = 117$): claimed the postee's sexuality was a pretence. Many posts contained several, and often competing, discourses. Since we are unable to present all posts here, we also selected exemplars from each of the four main gender-sexual permutations (male–female, male–male, female–male, female–female) where each of these identity categories was drawn on by the poster (not necessarily all in the same post).

We begin with a heterosexual male account of discarded sexuality that invokes notions of masculinity, homosocial bragging, and humour.

Male-to-female

Sexually discarded

A1

'(name omitted) the Hoe'

Anonymous says:

This waist [sic.] of Oxygen is my ex of 15 years. She has been cocked more times than John Wayne's Gun. She has been shot over more times than Bagdad [sic.]. She has seen more loads than your Mums [sic.] Washing Machine. Enter at your own Risk!⁶

This text is simultaneously readable as boastful talk of sexual activity but also talk about an ex-partner's sexual infidelity. The latter is immediately readable from the disparaging term applied to her in the title 'Hoe' but also in the warning to others 'Enter at your own Risk!' Schulz's (1975) historical analysis of derogative terms applied to women and girls shows that 'Hoe' (whore) is a term typically applied to heterosexually promiscuous women (see also Winkler Reid, 2014, on the construction of women as 'slags'). Combined with the warning 'Enter at your own Risk!' which is readable as heterosexual, 'Enter' suggests that A1 is male and is speaking to a male audience.

A1 presents as fact a three-part list (Jefferson, 2004) of sexual activities that have been done to the woman 'she has been cocked', 'she has been shot over' and 'she has seen more loads'. Jefferson (2004) showed that the presence of three or more items on a list adds clarity and weight to arguments: in other words, strength by numbers. Therefore, A1's use of listing helps strengthen his account of his ex-partner as a 'Hoe' and avoid potential discord or criticism. This works also to raise his masculine status by suggesting that he is the one that has done these things to her. However given that this post is also a warning, his masculine status might be challenged without him providing a reason for the breakdown of their '15 years' relationship since other readers might interpret these sexual acts as done by other(s). What A1 does to try and avoid this interpretation is construct his account

as 'humorous': 'cocked more times than John Wayne's Gun', 'shot over more times than Bagdad' and 'seen more loads than your Mums Washing Machine' (see Benwell, 2004 for more on how men use humour as a deflection strategy). In other words, the sexual humour works to position him as the 'doer' of these sexual acts because it portrays him as less emotionally invested. A1's deployment of 'jokey' humour also works to present him as one of the lads (albeit a more mature one since his age is referenced with his knowledge of John Wayne). That is, this is normative behaviour for men, whether they produce or consume this type of material, and so he constructs himself as blameless for such posting (Whisnant, 2010: 122).

In the following extract the heterosexual man's promiscuity is normalized with the addition of point scoring against another man, that is, sexual trophyism (Barbee, 1997). This linguistic device has also been used by some men in their accounts of their own violence to women (Hearn, 1998).

Sexual trophyism

A2

'Your wife dude'

Anonymous says:

I had an affair with this lady for over two years. But her sneaky husband kept following us around, trying to take photos of us together. He threatened to expose our relationship. In the end I got so annoyed I ended it. So here you are dude your wife and the photos you never got to take. She had never given a full blowjob before she met me her husband was super uptight I left her as a cock sucking anal queen.

It is immediately clear from the title that A2 has had some form of relationship with another man's 'wife'. In A2's description of his affair, two aspects are marked out. Firstly, that the woman he had an affair with was a 'lady'. The selection of a category carries important implications for how the text is read. Edwards (1998: 25) argues that these categories carry 'potentially useful conventional associations with age, marital status, and potential sexual availability' such that 'lady' infers she is respectable (Stokoe, 2003: 331). It could also convey literally, ironically or sarcastically, that she is smart, sensible or selective, or specifically not these. Secondly, his marker of time suggests that this was not purely sexual but that they were emotionally involved. In working up this position he is able to position himself as the 'victim' of 'her sneaky husband' who 'threatened to expose' them, which suggests A2 was also cheating on someone. Threatening to expose them positions the 'sneaky husband' in a position of power and indeed the outcome was that the affair was 'ended'. A2's posting explicit images of his ex-partner is readable as a way to re-empower himself, and this can be seen in the sexual acts he claims she has done ('given a full blowjob' 'anal queen') with him, and not with her husband. The graphic detail of the sexual acts also works to position him as sexually powerful (and her as weak and subordinate) vis-à-vis her husband since he was able to get

her to do things she might not have done with her husband, as is visible in his downgrading of her from a 'lady' to a 'cock sucking anal queen'. Whilst the selection 'lady' infers respectability and modesty, 'cock sucking anal queen' implies 'frivolity' and 'sleaziness' (Stokoe, 2003: 331). This 'category, predicate and task' (Hester and Eglin, 1997) in switching from 'lady' to 'cock sucking anal queen' functions to downgrade the overall victory of her husband in keeping his wife, whilst claiming victory over her husband in the sexual acts he had with his wife, a theme of cuckolding familiar to Shakespeare.

Male-to-male

Trophyism, power and victory over another man are themes by the male poster in the following extract. The intention was to humiliate a former intimate male partner by taking photos of their sexual interactions.

Sexual humiliation

A3

'Cheating ex-boyfriend exposed and totally humiliated'

Anonymous says:

This is my cheating ex-boyfriend in all his glory. I found out he was cheating, so I didn't say I knew. I just spent weeks making loads of humiliating sex snaps and vids of him! So I could expose him and get revenge after dumping him. This is what the cheating slut deserves!! I've got loads of him sucking dick, balls, licking ass, spreading his legs and being the slut he always is. I've no doubt that his new bf doesn't have any idea what he's really like, so maybe he'll come across these photos and realise. Have fun jacking off guys, and if you reblog or repost these pics please let me know so I can get a kick out of seeing them spread

Any poster who believes that their ex-partner has committed infidelity or finished the relationship is likely to be in a position of disempowerment through loss of control. One of the objectives of revenge, and the tactics for dealing with, and sometimes coping with, such disempowerment is to do something, which is perceived as regaining control (Berkowitz and Cornell, 2005). A3 does this by stating at the outset what his intention was and what he believes he has achieved: 'Cheating ex-boyfriend exposed and totally humiliated'. Yet at the same time, re-empowerment is likely to have less impact unless the other person is aware of the act. A3 implies that his ex-partner is aware of him posting these images 'totally humiliated', although he indicates that he would like his 'ex-boyfriend's' new partner to remain unaware: 'I've no doubt that his new bf doesn't have any idea what he's really like, so maybe he'll come across these photos and realise.'

Yet seeking revenge through displaying explicit images of one's ex-partner may be perceived by others as purely vindictive (Johansson and Hammarén, 2007: 67), and, as such, the poster is compelled to provide an account of their action (Salter,

2013). Accordingly, the poster seeks to ‘instrumentalise double standards in sexual mores to punish an ex-partner for leaving them’, blaming the victim for their exposure (Salter, 2013: 1). A3 accounts for this by blaming his ex-partner as ‘my cheating ex-boyfriend’, and ‘I found out he was cheating’. However, A3 risks being viewed by others as purely vindictive because once he was aware of the claimed infidelity he ‘spent weeks making loads of humiliating sex snaps and vids [videos] of him!... I’ve got loads of him sucking dick, balls, licking ass, spreading his legs’. In order to avoid readers drawing this conclusion, A3 presents this as also being for readers’ benefit, including for the benefit of those who are anonymous or uninvolved: ‘Have fun jacking off guys’.

In blaming the pictured person for their exposure, producers of revenge porn are able to take the moral high ground by implying that that person’s purported crime was worse, or at least equal to, having their private images made public. Consumers who enjoy this material are able to displace responsibility, since it is not they who have humiliated the pictured man. They are only looking at, or masturbating to, the images and perhaps also passing them on to others: ‘... if you reblog or repost these pics’ (Whisnant, 2010: 122). Given the wealth of data on MyEx.com both producers and consumers of this material might also point out that this practice is commonplace so as to diffuse responsibility. It is not they then who are the monsters, but other men who are posting these images or the man themselves for their purported crimes (Whisnant, 2010: 127). This ‘quieter backstory’, as Whisnant (2010: 126–129) points out, is about how men manage their identities as ‘real’, and still ‘moral’, men, whilst engaging with the production and consumption of revenge porn.

Although revenge for infidelity is the main theme in the following extract, it carries two warnings: risky sex, and sexual dissatisfaction.

Risky sex

A4

‘Slimy Grindr Creep’

Anonymous says:

[Anonymized] likes nothing more than to meet as many guys as possible from Grindr and other apps usually asking for bareback sex. [Anonymized] enjoys fucking as many other desperate guys as possible behind his boyfriends back. His tiny cock doesn’t leave you very satisfied.

A4 categorizes this man as ‘Slimy’ and a ‘Creep’, along with the location of these categorizations from ‘Grindr’.⁷ Sacks (1992) pointed out that when someone is categorized they are presumed to be the doer of particular actions (category-bound activities) and have specific characteristics (category-bound predicates). Sacks (1992) uses the example of babies crying and requiring love and attention. Men are presumed to be sexually promiscuous and this can be seen in the data when A4 says ‘meet as many guys as possible’ (Varella et al., 2014). However,

'Slimy' and a 'Creep' alone are relatively non-descriptive categories without further qualification and justification (Jayyusi, 1984). A4's account centres on the pictured as interested in risky sex with numerous partners, and as a person who 'likes nothing more than to meet as many guys as possible', and who is 'asking for bareback sex'.⁸ In doing so, A4 positions himself as practising safe sex thus implying that his ex-partner sought 'bareback sex' because he was unwilling to provide it. In positioning himself as such A4 works up a contrast pair (Smith, 1978); safe/unsafe sexual practices, and those that are interested in unsafe 'bareback sex' are categorized as 'desperate'. Thus, A4's account can be seen as a warning to other men.

However, some viewers might still be interested in 'bareback sex' and potentially A4's ex-partner. Indeed, Blackwell's (2008) study of same-sex dating sites found that 43% of men wanting 'bareback sex' used dating websites to recruit sex partners even though unprotected same-sex male intercourse is likely to place both sexual partners at a higher risk of HIV transmission. A4 cautions interested viewers by stating that his ex-partner's penis was 'tiny' which he claims 'doesn't leave you very satisfied.' This appears to achieve two things. Firstly, the reference to sexual dissatisfaction acts as a potential deterrent to interested others. Secondly, it implies that he remained in the relationship whilst sexually unfulfilled, as well as practising safe sex, allows him to take the moral high ground.

Female-to-male

Warnings and sexual dissatisfactions were relatively common themes in our data for both men and women. In the following heterosexual woman's post, the main thrust of the extract focuses on his inability to satisfy her because she claims he does not have a 'big, long, thick dick.'

Sexual dissatisfaction

A5

'So small you have to look twice, to see it!'

Anonymous says:

This guy promised he had a big, long, thick dick, but boy was I in for a surprise! I was with this guy for a year, we didn't have sex until the last few months of our relationship. When I first laid eyes on his dick, I couldn't believe how small it was. I tried my best to stay with him because I really liked him. To be honest the sex was terrible, the only thing he did well was eating me out. That wasn't enough and I decided to end things with him after a yearlong relationship. I couldn't even feel it when I tried putting it in my mouth. Size really does matter, no matter what you hear!!!

Disparaging comments about the man's penis size or aesthetics are an established form of ridicule of men. Most of these comments centre on the man's penis as not straight, too small, of narrow girth, or having an unattractive glans (relative to

perceived averages) (Hall, 2015). This is not surprising, given that ‘in many cultures it [the penis] has come to symbolise attributes such as largeness, strength, endurance, ability, courage, intelligence, knowledge, dominance over men, possession of women; a symbol of loving and being loved’, as well as fertility (Wylie and Eardley, 2007: 1449). What is especially interesting about this post is that it centres on what she hoped for, ‘a big, long, thick dick’, rather than perjoratively talking about the man’s penis size or aesthetics as a means to punish or hurt for a prior misdemeanor. Given the A5 poster is compelled to produce an account for her claims, she provides an account based on his deceit ‘promised he had a big, long, thick dick, but boy was I in for a surprise’. A5 deploys a three-part list of penis attributes ‘big, long, thick’ (Jefferson, 2004). In this context, as with A1, the three-part list works to add clarity and weight to her account of his lie. Yet readers may sympathize since penis size, without cosmetic surgery, cannot be changed significantly. Therefore, A5 also works up an account of herself as being attentive: ‘I tried my best’, ‘I really liked him’, and initially tolerant, ‘I was with this guy for a year’. In other words, she ‘tried’ her ‘best’ but due to his ‘poor sexual performance’ because of his genital size – ‘I couldn’t believe how small it was’ – she is compelled to terminate the relationship, ‘I decided to end things’. In doing so, A4 takes the moral high ground similarly to A4. A5 culminates her post by correcting the catchphrase ‘it’s not the size, it’s what you do with it that matters’ (Szalavitz, 2013) to ‘Size really does matter, no matter what you hear!!!’.

Given the historical, cultural, sexual and gender importance that tends to be associated with the penis it is not surprising that many women who engage in revenge porn state that their ex-partner’s penis and sexual performance was inadequate (Wylie and Eardley, 2007). In the following extract, although the poster discusses the man’s genital size and shape, she also claims his sexual likes are dubious and potentially non-normative.

Kinky sex

A6

‘JUST WANTS TO USE YOU FOR SEX’

Anonymous says:

This guy goes through women like there is no tomorrow they all must wanna feel what a square cock feel like. Then they find out he’s a kinky guy into all sorts of toy play. He loves himself so much its time share the love, so here is his square cock. Plus to show how kinky he is a vid of him showing you how he uses toy on himself. He said it never makes him cum but I think he was contracting on that dildo I let you decide if does or not.

A6 describes her (ex-)partner as sexually promiscuous ‘goes through women like there is no tomorrow’, followed by speculation on his appeal to other women who ‘must wanna feel’ his ‘square cock’. Ridiculing the shape of his penis serves several purposes. A6 deploys the extreme-case formulation ‘all’ when referring to other

women ‘they all’. Extreme-case formulations are ways of referring to people, events and objects by invoking minimal or maximal properties (Pomerantz, 1986). Pomerantz’s (1986: 219–220) work showed that people may use extreme-case formulations in adversarial situations and when they anticipate others undermining their claims or to propose that some behaviour is either wrong or right. The deployment of ‘all’ works to suggest that other women are not romantically interested in him, thus implying women’s interest centres on him as a sexual novelty. In doing so she is also able to reduce the potential for multiple sexual partners to increase his masculine status (see Dickerson, 2000; Miller, 2008; Nylund, 2007 for more on masculine status and multiple heterosexual partners). In differentiating herself from other women – ‘they all must wanna feel’ – she is able to work up an account of herself as a victim of his infidelity. Yet, as we have seen in previous posts, the poster is often obliged to provide a justification for their action (Johansson and Hammarén, 2007). A6 does this by providing an account of her (ex-)partner’s sexuality ‘a kinky guy into all sorts of toy play’. What is interesting here is the supplementary information to his ‘kinkiness’. Given that being ‘kinky’ might be viewed positively, A6 proceeds to frame his ‘kinkiness’ as homosexually-related ‘he uses toy on himself. He said it never makes him cum but I think he was contracting on that dildo’ (see Edwards, 2003, on social anxieties concerning masculinity and homosexuality).

Female-to-female

Whilst multiple heterosexual partners might elevate a man’s homosocial status (see Dickerson, 2000; Miller, 2008; Nylund, 2007), women risk being seen as ‘sluts’ (Stokoe, 2003). In the following post, this social norm is invoked by the poster in her account.

Sexual promiscuity

A7

‘lesbian slut! cheater! liar! thief!’

Anonymous says:

I met [anonymized] through a friend and started to hang out. long story short me and her got together a few times I was her first took her virginity n she promised to be together blablabla she ended up hooking up with a few other woman behind my back and denied we even had anything going on! she had sex with 16 other women behind my back! n lied to my face! She also stole a lot of my makeup and other things . . . to this day she denies we had anything but these pics say otherwise [anonymized] bitch!

A7 begins her post by categorizing her ex-partner with a list of four negative attributes – ‘slut’, ‘cheater’, ‘liar’ and ‘thief’ – that break social norms (McDonald and Crandall, 2015) – that is, breaking the social norms of monogamy, honesty, truthfulness and respect for others’ property. As noted previously, lists

add clarity and weight to arguments, ward off potential counter claims, and act as devices in and through which to orientate (Jefferson, 2004). The items on A7's list allow for the pictured women to be presented as dreadful, thus allowing the poster to be positioned as victim. What is also noticeable in A7's title is that the sexuality of the person pictured is made relevant as 'lesbian'. People invoke identity categories to set the tone and context in which the rest of the text or conversation is to be understood (Sacks, 1992). This means that the preceding text is readable through the term 'lesbian'.

As we have noted throughout our analysis, even though A7 has categorized the pictured as a 'lesbian slut! cheater! liar! thief!', she is obliged to qualify these categorizations in order to give them meaning (Sacks, 1992). A7 qualifies the accusation of lesbian infidelity as 'she had sex with 16 other women'; deception, 'she promised to be together'; untruthfulness, 'denied we even had anything going on!' and pilfering, 'She also stole a lot of my makeup and other things'. But what is interesting is that these claimed misdemeanours do not appear to be the main motivations for posting the images; denial of the relationship by the pictured woman and presumably their significant others seem to be the main catalyst: 'she denies we had anything but these pics say otherwise'.

Although A7 has positioned herself as wronged and justified in seeking revenge, she also makes the claim, 'I was her first took her virginity'. This serves two purposes. Firstly, it helps to bolster A7's position in that she thought this was a long-term intimate relationship rather than a sexual encounter. In many societies a young woman's virginity is typically perceived as precious, and as something that is to be maintained and given to the person they hope will remain a long-term intimate partner (Carpenter, 2015). However, as Carpenter (2015) points out, whilst taking a young woman's virginity is seen as a prize for some men, providing homosocial boasting rights, in more recent times with challenges to such conventional gender norms, some young women have come to see taking virginity in a similar manner. Thus, stating that she 'took' the pictured woman's virginity in the context of revenge allows us to see this as boastful.

Whilst A7 invoked lesbian sexuality in order to authenticate their relationship, A8 invokes lesbian sexual identity as a means to inauthenticate the pictured women's lesbian sexual identity as 'prelesbian.'

Phony sexuality

A8

'This bitch really has LOW self-esteem (Lesbian)'

Anonymous says:

I dated this girl for a few months, at the time she was into Wicca, and just about anything to upset her parents. She quickly turned into an attention whore. One day she tried to get with one of my friends and I thought it was time to call it quits. Needless to say, the breakup did not go well and she even threatened suicide on more than one occasion. I come to find out she's what we call in the lesbian community a

pretresbian. She is only lesbian because she is spiteful about men who wouldn't give her the time of day when she was younger.

Several things are immediately noticeable in A8's title. Firstly, A8 categorizes her as a 'bitch' – a malicious, unpleasant, selfish person, especially a woman (*Oxford English Online Dictionary*, 2015). The categorization (Sacks, 1992) is qualified with the category-bound predicate 'LOW self-esteem' emphasized with the extreme-case formulation 'really' (Pomerantz, 1986) and electronic shouting 'LOW' (Barrett, 2012). Significantly, A8's identification of the pictured woman as a 'Lesbian' is parenthesized as opposed to saying perhaps 'This lesbian bitch really has LOW self-esteem'. Parenthesizing 'Lesbian' in this way suggests there may be some difficulty with this identity.

What is interesting is that A8 immediately begins the main body of her text by marking the time she was in a relationship with the pictured woman, 'I dated this girl for a few months'. Doing so allows A8 to imply that she had less emotional investment in the former relationship, thus deflecting unwarranted claims of vindictiveness from the pictured woman's claimed attempted infidelity, 'she tried to get with one of my friends'. Time is also marked for the pictured woman's former interest, 'she was into Wicca,⁹ and just about anything to upset her parents'. The marking of time by 'was' and the length of their relationship 'a few months' achieve two things. Firstly, membership of the identity category 'into Wicca' is marked as rebellion 'anything to upset her parents', thus suggesting to viewers that she was not a 'real' member of this sub-cultural group (Widdicombe and Woofitt, 1990). Secondly, A8 is also working up a picture of the woman as having multiple and changing identities and thus signalling instability. The pictured woman's unstable identity is further qualified by claiming that she 'even threatened suicide on more than one occasion'. In positioning the pictured woman as unstable, A8 works up the contrast pair (Smith, 1978) of identities stable/unstable, which allows A8 to position herself as stable; later claiming that the pictured woman's membership of the 'lesbian community' is a 'phony' (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007) 'pretresbian'. As we have pointed out, those who are seen to be non-normative or not having 'real' group membership are often declared 'phony' or 'defective' (Sacks, 1992).

Working up a picture of the woman as a 'phony' lesbian and as mentally unstable, having 'threatened suicide', does three further things. Firstly, the inherent disempowerment from her ex-partner attempting to commit infidelity, 'she tried to get with one of my friends', is deflected, allowing A8 to present herself as in control. Indeed, A8 claimed to be the one who ended the relationship, 'I thought it was time to call it quits'. Secondly, A8 is signalling caution to viewers who might know or be interested in a relationship with this woman. Finally, A8 is also able to minimize potential claims by viewers that she is purely motivated by revenge. Overall, what A8's account shows is that gender and sexual identities are presumed to be stable with specific identity-bound categories and predicates. Those seen to contravene these conventions are thus labelled as 'phony' or 'defective' (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007) in transgressing conventional notions of gender/sexual identity boundaries.

Discussion

As noted in the introductory sections, there are various ways of analysing revenge porn, and thus particular posts and extracts, for example, the psycho-social dynamics of revenge, or the expansion and affordances of ICTs. While it is difficult to separate out different analytical frameworks, our focus here is on gender and sexual positioning, and the use of gender and sexual meanings in the practice of and accounting for revenge porn. In particular, we were interested in how posters of revenge porn invoke gender and sexuality to account for posting explicit images of an ex-partner, and what were the similarities and differences between different sexual framings of revenge porn: male-to-female, female-to-male, male-to-male, female-to-female online postings. In addressing these questions, eight basic gendered-sexual themes were identified across sexual 'orientations' of poster-postee: sexually discarded; sexual trophyism; sexually degraded; risky sex; sexual dissatisfaction; kinky sex; sexual promiscuity; and phony sexuality. Analysis of the posts in this way highlights how the written texts¹⁰ worked by invoking tropes about gender and sexuality in accounting for their actions.

In terms of similarities between the different sexual framings, what is clear is that the display of sexual orientation, whether heterosexual or same-sex, is through antagonism, power and control, or worse, towards those who have been, and maybe still are, the object of desire. The structure and direction of revenge porn, and its non-consensual and abusive form, parallel in text those respective forms of past or present sexual attraction. Sex, desire, even love, are structurally paralleled by (attempted) revenge, humiliation, abuse. The intensity of desire, and its disappointment or frustration, provide the grounds for revenge and abuse, as indicated in the revenge porn text, and sometimes shown in the accompanying visuals (see Note 3).

This structure of affect is comparable to the dynamics of power and control in marriage continuing after separation and divorce (cf. Delphy, 1976). Revenge porn is one way of continuing the gender-sexual dynamics of gender, sexuality, power and control post-separation into abuse, or even beginning a new phase of more explicit power, control and abuse. For example, numerous studies of 'domestic violence' and 'intimate partner violence' have pointed to the risks of violence and abuse in post-separation, as summarized by Macdonald (2013: 3):

Domestic violence may start or escalate at the point of separation and/or post-separation (Abrahams, 1994; Hester and Radford, 1996; Humphreys and Thiara, 2003; Richards, 2003) and the post-separation period can be a time of acute danger for women and children, where risk of homicide increases (Wilson and Daly, 2002).

For a start, there are differences in form and impact between physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and representational violence and threats thereof. Additionally, the difference is the extension of potential violence and abuse into the cyberworld, with its own features, such as those of permanency and

replicability, without total deletion, as afforded by ICTs. Specific sexual orientations may be overridden by the monological logics of desire and revenge (counter-desire), made possible in extended form by the affordances of ICTs, despite their dialogical and interactive potential.

More specifically, this may involve the exertion of power in relation to loss of control and/or of an (ex-)partner and/or power to continue controlling an (ex-)partner or power enacted through gender and sexuality. Such revenges were generally explained by justifications rather than excuses, so that the avenged person (the passive postee) is the one to be blamed (as active) for the actions performed towards them (the active sexual poster), comparable to men's justifications for their violence to women (Ptacek, 1988; Hearn, 1998).

However, such exertion of power and control, and its justification, was not unrestrained, and here a certain contradictory complexity is apparent. What was common across all eight central themes was that the poster claimed their ex-partner had committed some misdemeanour leading to the breakdown of the relationship, and so claimed positioning as supposed victim. Claiming ex-partners had committed a misdemeanour was often not enough for the poster's claims to appear legitimate; posters frequently engaged in self-legitimation practices, probably to avoid or reduce the risks of being interpreted as having 'sour grapes' or simply being vindictive. This could suggest certain moral rules are employed, whereby to write more than a minimum required some 'good reasons'. If written texts were to be used, then the 'logics' used needed to be credible, and thus not open to further shaming of the poster as an inadequate partner, lover, spouse themselves.

At the same time, there are clear differences between discursively constructed gender/sexual orientations and genres of the posts and posters. The precise textual devices by which revenge porn is differentially practised, and justified, is then less about the affordances of ICTs, and more about gendered/sexual discursive positions and possibilities within dominant gender/sexual orders. For example, in the posts, references to women's bodies can be used not only to exact heterosexual revenge on them directly, but also on another (male) partner of the woman concerned, and so indirectly onto her. Focusing on gender and sexuality as discursive framings in this way is not to stereotype such practices according to sexual orientation. Different sexuality positionings, such as male–female or male–male, may invoke various straight and gay conventions respectively, as in the appeal to known or unknown other readers and audiences of assumed similar homosocial gay or straight men (cf. Heinskou, 2015; Thomson, 1999). It is through these devices, such as the appeal to similar (to the poster) others, that the differences between male-to-female, female-to-male, male-to-male, female-to-female online postings are most explicitly enacted.

To put this a little differently, using one example, men's postings of revenge porn, both straight and gay, and the discourses employed within and around them, draw on dominant repertoires of masculinities. In this sense, they are perhaps less novel than they may appear at first sight; rather, they are often extensions and elaborations of well-charted ways of abusing others, especially in the context of the

extensive sexist and misogynist texts online. On the other hand, posts by those positioning as women, whether straight or lesbian, tend to involve different forms, for example, of women posters as scorned revengers, or of women posteers as unfaithful or not a real lesbian. Justifications of such gender/sexual positionings often rest on external referencing, for example, to the/a man's sexual/penile inadequacy, incapability and just deserts, or the lesbian women's promiscuity or her inability to be a real and consistent lesbian, but rather a pretend lesbian, a pretesbian.

Having said that, a further word of caution is necessary, as in commenting on such positionings, we are not seeking to attribute such meanings exhaustively from specific posts, as there may well be considerable complexity and contradiction in the texts, given the nature of some of the online postings. Furthermore, we do not necessarily assume a match between online and offline person, for example, it is possible that not all the 'lesbian postings' may be lesbian women or those identifying as lesbian or even by women at all.

Finally, we note how the mass of online revenge porn, while complex and even contradictory in its accounting, seems to be strongly based in binary, non-queer gender positionings. In that way, despite the potentialities of virtual sexualities,¹¹ it reproduces broader gender hegemony. Online revenge porn is another site for the performance of gender hegemony, even with the variable sexual orientations said and shown. In contrast to possible blurrings of binary gender/sexuality (cf. *Monro, 2005; Roseneil, 2005*), revenge (porn), it seems, is not (yet) very queer.

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Notes

1. There is a variety of definitions of revenge porn (see *Hall and Hearn 2017*). For example, the US National Conference of State Legislature (2014) defined it as "the posting of nude or sexually explicit photographs or videos of people online without their consent, even if the photograph itself was taken with consent. It can follow a spurned spouse, girlfriend, or boyfriend seeking to get revenge by uploading photographs to websites, many of which are set up specifically for these kinds of photos or videos." An alternative view is that all pornography is revenge pornography (*Tyler, 2016*). Furthermore, some

- feminists and gender activists argue against both labels: ‘revenge pornography’ and ‘pornography’, as it is degrading to talk about such acts of violence as pornography.
2. MyEx.com was closed down on 22 June 2018 by the US Federal Trade Commission (<https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2018/06/ftc-nevada-obtain-order-permanently-shutting-down-revenge-porn>, Accessed 3 July 2018). This does in itself not distract from the subsequent analysis, as the kinds of extracts that follow are common in other revenge porn sites and posts.
 3. Wittgenstein (1922) “makes a distinction between *saying* and *showing* which is made to do additional crucial work. “What can be shown cannot be said,” that is, what cannot be formulated in sayable (sensual) propositions can only be shown... which Wittgenstein... describes as “things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest.” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2014: 2.2).
 4. In some instances, meanings are confirmed through the interaction of visual material and written text.
 5. When somebody makes reference to, for example, “my wife” (often both a gender and a sexuality marker), this has to be read in relation to any further gender markers present, since “wife” could refer to a heterosexual or a same-sex relationship. The claimed alternative presented was apparent from the self-identifications of the poster, the claimed identification of the postee, the visuals and/or other aspects of the written text.
 6. Text cited are verbatim, including grammatical errors, apart from changing identifiers.
 7. Grindr claims to be the largest and most popular all-male social network spanning 196 countries worldwide. Uses include finding a date, buddy, or friend.
 8. Anal sexual intercourse without the use of condoms.
 9. Introduced in the 1950s by the retired British civil servant Gerald Brosseau Gardner, Wicca is a modern form of paganism, and of witchcraft religion (Guilly, 2008).
 10. To analyze those posts with only headlines or no or minimal written texts would entail visual analysis, with attendant ethical complications. In some cases, posters may have considered that the visuals speak for themselves, and that a separate rationale was unnecessary or difficult to formulate. Such ‘only visuals’ or ‘almost only visuals’ posts might reveal, if subject to visual or multi-modal analysis, different patterns to those we addressed. There would likely be methodological challenges in translating meanings between written and visual data.
 11. These online potentialities have been widely documented elsewhere (e.g. Elund, 2015; O’Riordan and Phillips, 2007), and seem, currently at least, to be a separable aspect of online sexualities; this may change in the future.

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